Vasubandhu's Humorous Stories:

Preachers as Seen in *Vyākhyāyukti*

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0. Introduction

Following his *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu (ca. fifth century, Northwestern India) wrote *Vyākhyāyukti* (VyY). VyY is comprised of five chapters. Unlike the first four chapters, which are about interpretive methods for āgama sūtras, the fifth is directed toward (future) preachers of the Dharma (**dhārmakathika*, *chos smra ba po*) and presents models for preaching that can be used for proselytization.¹⁾ The fifth chapter is divided into three sections:

§ 5.1 [Preachers] inspiring [listeners to “listen with reverence”]

§ 5.2 [Preachers] clearly presenting [to listeners] the aim [of “listening with reverence”]

§ 5.3 [Preachers] telling curious stories, humorous stories, and world-weary stories to depressed [listeners], dozing off [listeners], and those feeling down and confused due to misunderstandings

In § 5.3, which is the subject of this paper, models for three types of stories (**kathā*)—curious, humorous, and world-weary—are presented. Their content is unusual when compared to Vasubandhu's numerous other writings. One does not find many similar examples. In this paper, I will discuss these humorous stories, shining a light on an unknown side of preachers in the Sarvāstivādan sphere around the fifth century.

1. The Three Types of Preaching and the Corresponding Listeners

Out of the various kinds of people that are the object of Buddhist proselytization (**vineya*), which were Vasubandhu's humorous stories directed towards? Also, what is the relationship between this kind of humorous preaching and other kinds of preaching? The three types of stories modeled in § 5.3 correspond to three types of listeners (**śrotṛjana*).

{Question} [How should one speak] by telling unusual, funny, and world-weary stories?

{Answer} For those depressed and those dozing off, in order to make their minds clear, one should tell [them] curiosity-piquing [stories] and funny stories[, respectively]. For those who are confused,

one should [tell stories] that make them weary of the world. This is to make those that [thereby] become weary of the world enter into a state in which the mind is [concentrated] on a single object (*cittaikāgratā; one-pointedness of mind). (VyY, D shi 129a5–6, P si 150a3–4)

Vasubandhu states that listeners who feel depressed because they are unable to practice that which should be practiced by Buddhists should be told curious stories, that listeners who are dozing off should be told humorous stories, and that listeners who are confused because they have misunderstandings regarding Buddhism should be told world-weary stories. Below I have summarized these relationships:²⁾

	Listener that is the Object	State of the Listener	Effective Preaching	Aim of Preaching
§ 5.3.1	Depressed people	Feeling down	Curious stories	To provoke curiosity
§ 5.3.2	People dozing off	Feeling down	Humorous stories	To wake them up
§ 5.3.3	People misunderstanding Buddhism	Confused	World-weary stories	To give rise to one-pointedness of mind

Vasubandhu does not clearly state whether these three types of listeners—depressed people, people dozing off, and confused people—are renunciates or householders. However, he is probably referring to people in both categories. At any rate, all three types do not conscientiously listen to preaching. Therefore, we can see the three types of stories as forms of preaching that are preparatory stages for listening to the teachings (having curiosity, waking up from drowsiness, and focusing the mind). We could say that such preaching serves as a “warm-up” or “intermission.” Next, I will introduce the humorous stories in VyY § 5.3.2.

2. Vasubandhu's Humorous Stories

2.1. Introduction: The Aim of Humorous Stories (VyY, D shi 129b3, P si 150b2)

How should humorous stories (*prahasana-kathā, *rab tu dga' ba'i gtam*) be told? Based on the telling of humorous stories in order to awaken those dozing off. First, listen to stories.³⁾

2.2. The Story of the Donkey (VyY, D shi 129b3–5, P si 150b2–4)

The following story is known: “To a donkey worn out from carrying a heavy load, a foal said, ‘Let’s dance.’ After the [donkey] said, ‘You will dance and I will move my ears,’ the [foal] danced, and the [donkey] moved [its] ears to go along with the foal[’s dance].” “When I am preaching the Dharma, do you not move both ears (listen) and enjoy [my preaching]?”⁴⁾ Such is [the story].

In this story, the donkey worn out from shouldering a heavy load is a listener, the energetically dancing foal corresponds to the preacher, and the donkey’s act of moving its ears corre-

sponds to listening, and the foal's act of dancing to preaching. In short, it is saying, "I know (you) are tired, but at the very least (you) could listen to me." The allegory of the listener being "worn out from carrying a heavy load" probably refers to being fatigued due to everyday work and then dozing off during preaching.

2.3. The Story of the Lion and the Fox (VyY, D shi 129b5–130a1, P si 150b4–151a1)

The following story is known: "A fox wanting meat caught by a lion's hunting⁵⁾ followed the lion and, along with the lion, became hungry. After [the lion] killed a large boar, the [lion] said to the fox, 'Carry this.' [However], he (the fox) did not have the power to lift that heavy load because he was weak. [The fox] thought, 'It would be awful if [the lion] gets angry at me and I am killed,' and could not say no to the [lion's] words. [The fox] knew that this [lion] was foolish and very proud. The [fox] said [to the lion], 'Trying to carry this heavy load, I must do two jobs. I must carry the heavy load and also must call out. So, since I cannot do these two jobs at the same time, can you (the lion) do one of them for me?' The lion, proud and therefore not wanting to call [out], said, 'If that's the case, you (the fox) call out and I'll carry the heavy load.' In other words, the lion carried the load and the fox called out, going along with the lion."

In the same way, "I preach the Dharma, which is [like] carrying a heavy load. Please first just do that [call out], going along with me. [If you do that] things will surely be better."⁶⁾ Such is [the story].

In this story, the lion carrying the heavy load is the preacher, and the fox getting food just by calling out is the listener. Considering that the fox was expected to "call out" (*skad*), it appears that at the time, people listening to preaching were expected to vocally respond in some way. This is probably an allegory with the following message: "Preaching is tough, like carrying a heavy load. Isn't listening comparatively easy?" Here Vasubandhu is being a little self-deprecating.

2.4. The Story of the Old Monk (VyY, D shi 130a1–2, P si 151a1–2)

The following [story] is known: A certain old monk,⁷⁾ trying to do something that is not skillful means (sexual intercourse)⁸⁾, approached a woman, but, unable to do it (sexual intercourse), said, "While the World-Honored One said, 'Men have sexual desire for women (*bud med kyi bsam pa ni skyes pas so*),'⁹⁾ [I] cannot do it (sexual intercourse) and therefore contradict the sutras."

In this story, an old monk does not have sexual desire (he is impotent) and therefore contradicts the sutra statement that "men have sexual desire for women." Those who knew the weight of the criticism of "contradicting the sutras" (*sūtravirodha*), which was used by Vasubandhu and others in treatises when debating doctrine, probably found the story especially amusing due to the gap between the gravity of this criticism and the story.

2.5. The Story of People with Belief (VyY, D shi 130a2–3, P si 151a2–3)

In the same way, “Despite you all being people with belief, you do not wish to listen to the true Dharma, and therefore contradict the sutras, which teach, “[One] of the many signs of belief [is] being a person who wishes to listen to the true Dharma.” Such is [the story].

In the sutras we find, “A person with belief wishes to see the holy ones and wishes to listen to the true Dharma” (*dad pa can ni 'phags pa rnams mthong bar 'dod pa yin | dam pa'i chos nyan par 'dod pa yin* | VyYT, D si 294a5–6, P i 184b2; quoted parenthetically in Guṇamati's *Vyākhyāyuktīkā*). To, despite this, have belief and yet not wish to listen to the true Dharma is to contradict the sutras.

2.6. The Story of the Old Woman and the Thief (VyY, D shi 130a3–5, P si 151a3–6)

The following [story] is known: A certain poor old woman was in the house in which she used to live when she was rich.¹⁰⁾ At night, a thief, having desire, opened a hole in the house and entered. Looking for goods with both hands in the darkness, [his hand] bumped into one of the dishes,¹¹⁾ making a sound. The woman said, “Young man, [I]¹²⁾ didn't find anything even when [I] looked during the day[.] How, despite this, will you find [things] in the dark?”

In the same way, “If it is difficult for even a person with a clear intellect and sharpness to grasp the meaning of the Buddha's teachings, which have concealed intent, it goes without saying [that it is difficult for] a person with a mind captivated by the darkness of dozing off.” Such is [the story].

This story reproaches people for sleeping, contrasting “a person with a clear intellect and sharpness” and “a person dozing off.” It is difficult to understand the meanings of the Buddha's teachings, which contain concealed intent (*abhiprāya*), even for the former (likened to the old women rummaging for things during the day). Therefore, it goes without saying that it will be difficult for the latter (likened to the thief rummaging for things at night). “The house in which she used to live when she was rich” is probably an allegory for having missed opportunities to listen to the Buddha's teachings.

2.7. The Story of the Non-Buddhist Who Does Not Realize His Error and Cries (VyY, D shi 130a5–6, P si 151a6–8)

The following [story] is known: [When a certain bald non-Buddhist]¹³⁾ was reading the *Mahābhārata* out loud and shedding tears, [a certain person]¹⁴⁾ said, “Venerable One, why are you sobbing?” So, [the non-Buddhist] said, “Have you seen how much suffering Sītā experienced?” [He was then] told [by that person], “This is the *Mahābhārata*, not the *Rāmāyana*,”¹⁵⁾ so [he said], “My heart is crying because my crying was meaningless.”¹⁶⁾

In the same way, “When I explain the Dharma, my preaching is meaningless with you dozing off.” Such is [the story].

In this humorous story, due to a certain non-Buddhist having been reading the *Mahābhārata* while half-sleeping, he mistook it for the *Rāmāyana*'s story of Sītā's abduction and even shed tears of pity and compassion. However, after it was pointed out that he was reading the *Mahābhārata* and not the *Rāmāyana*, he lamented that his pity and compassion was meaningless. The lesson here is that in the same way, the Buddha's teachings will be meaningless unless one intently listens.

2.8. Similar Stories (VyY, D shi 130a7–b1, P si 151a8–b1)

[The story] of an old man similarly being unable to take the complete precepts, as well as the stories of a dull woman who did not respond to such a [story],¹⁷⁾ should be provided as appropriate; "[Dozing off,] you cannot be inspired to listen [to the Dharma]," in other words, to awaken [people] dozing off, these kinds of humorous stories should be told.

"[The story] of an old man not being able to take the precepts" is glossed by Guṇamati as follows (the quotation from VyY is shown in **bold**):

An old monk similarly being unable to take the precepts. This is because he [can]not reply as indicated in "Are you a man?" (*khyod skyes pa yin nam*) and so on¹⁸⁾ [when] receiving the complete [precepts]. (VyYT, D si 294a7, P i 184b5–6)

This story's intention is the same as 2.4. "The Story of the Old Man." The joke is that the old man cannot answer that he is a man upon being asked such when receiving the four precepts because he is impotent.

As is wrote in 1. above, these humorous stories aim to wake people up who are dozing off. After making the listeners laugh and removing their drowsiness, they can concentrate on the sermon.

3. Conclusion

From Vasubandhu's humorous stories, we can see that in his time listeners would doze off during preaching, laugh at jokes, and call out in response to preaching. The preacher probably would use the likes of humorous stories before preaching (as a warm-up) or in between sermons (as an intermission) in order to put those not listening to the Buddha's teachings in a state suitable for doing so.

Judging from VyY, it appears that Vasubandhu himself may have been a preacher. With that said, it is surprising that he was paying attention even to people who were dozing off. He even wove drama, vulgarity, and self-deprecation (2.3. "Preaching is like carrying a

heavy load”) into his humorous stories. Vasubandhu going this far to lead audience members to listen to the Dharma perhaps reflects that during his time people did not listen to the Dharma unless one was this attentive, as well as that this was to the extent that monks felt the need to tell humorous anecdotes.¹⁹⁾

Notes

- 1) See Horiuchi 2008 and Ueno (forthcoming).
- 2) I created the below table while adding supplemental information to the relevant passages in VyY.
- 3) This humorous story is quoted in *Gāthārthasaṃgraha* (GAS, D 241a4–b7, P 261b3–262b1; compiler unknown). However, the sequence of events in the story differs. It appears that the compiler of GAS intentionally added to the text from VyY. The Tibetan text of GAS in the present paper is prepared by Dr. Toshio Horiuchi.
- 4) In GAS, a clearer expression is used. “In the same way, [do you all] not move your ears and enjoy [my preaching] by listening, going along with my shouldering of the heavy burden that is preaching?” (*de bzhin ngas chos bshad pa'i khur khyer ba dang rjes su mthun par khyed la rna gtad [gtad] D; btad P*) *pas rna ba bsgul bar yang spro ba med do* ||: GAS, D 241a4–5, P 261b4–5).
- 5) In GAS's parallel expression, we find, “Because a certain fox wanted the leftovers of meat that a [certain] lion ate” (*wa zhig seng ges sha zos [zos] D; shos P*) *pa'i lhag ma 'dod pa'i phyir*: GAS, D 241b4, P 262a4–5).
- 6) The expression in GAS differs. “When I shoulder the heavy load of preaching, I cannot say that you [also] should go along with me and do the same [shoulder the heavy burden of breaching]. Therefore, practice correctly by listening, understanding, and practicing the meaning/aim” (*de bzhin du ngas chos bshad pa'i khur khyer na khyed nga dang mthun par de bzhin no zhes kyang smra mi nus so* || *de lta bas na rna gtad [gtad] D; btad P*) *cing bzung [bzung] D; gzung P*) *la don du bsgrub pas yang dag par bsgrub [bsgrub] P; sgrubs D*) *shig* ||: GAS, D 241b6–7, P 262a8–b1).
- 7) *rgan zhugs: mahallakah*. According to Mvy(IF) 8662, this refers to a monk who entered the monastic order after becoming old (in other words, this is a story about an old monk seeking out sexual intercourse with a woman). In GAS we find, “a certain old man” (*rgan po zhig*).
- 8) In VyY, we find *thabs ma yin pa* (**anupāya*), in Guṇamati's commentary, *mi tshangs par spyod pa* (**abrahmacarya*, something that is not pure conduct), and in GAS, *mi rigs pa* (**ayukta*, something that is inappropriate). Taking these terms together, I have understood them to mean “sexual intercourse.”
- 9) GAS quotes the following scripture passage: “Women are fondly thought of by men” (*bud med ni skyes pa la sems pa yin no*: GAS, D 241a5–6, P 261b5–6). A scriptural passage (source unknown) consisting of the VyY phrase followed by the GAS phrase is quoted in the “Indriya-nirdeśa” chapter of Sthiramati's *Abhidharmakośaṭīkā tattvārthā* (commentary on AKBh 39.15: *striyā strīvaṃ*; not found in AKTA Sanskrit manuscript). AKTA, D tho 145a3–4, P to 171b8–172a1: *de la bud med kyi bsam pa ni skyes pa'i yul can te* | *bud med ni skyes pa'i bsam pa can no zhes 'byung ba'i phyir ro* ||
- 10) GAS clearly states that the old woman has dementia: “A certain poor woman with dementia (*rgod bag can*) was in the house from [when] she was rich in the past” (*bud med dbul mo rgod bag can zhig snog phyug por gyur pa'i khyim zhig na 'dug go* ||: GAS, D 241a6–7, P 261b7).
- 11) While in VyY we find, “one of the dishes” (*kham snod dag gcig*), in GAS we find “many empty jeweled cups” (*rdza snod stong pa dag cig*). VyY's expression suggests that the thief made a small sound, while GAS's expression suggests that the chief bumped into multiple cups, creating a large sound. Or

maybe we should modify *kham snod dag gcig* in VyY to *kham snod dag cig*.

12) Filled in using GAS. "I [did something]" (*bdag gis*).

13) Filled in using GAS. "A certain bald non-Buddhist" (*mu stegs thal ba pa zhig*).

14) Filled in using GAS. "A certain person" (*gcig cig gis*).

15) *dga' byed 'gro ba'i gzhung*: The parallel part in GAS is transliterated as *ra ma ya na*. "He said, 'This is [a book] of the Bharatas, it is not [the book] called Rāmāyana'" (*'di ni bha ra ta las byung ba yin gyi | ra ma ya na'i ni ma yin no zhes smras so* ||: GAS, D 241b3, P 262a3–4).

16) GAS's parallel passage is as follows: "He said, 'It is meaningless that I cried'" (*bdag gis ngus pa ni don med do zhes smras so* ||: GAS, D 241b3, P 262a4).

17) Perhaps refers to an old woman or a lesbian. Guṇamati's commentary does not make this clear.

18) One of the "four-announcement ceremony" (*jñapticatortha-karman*) questions asked when receiving the complete precepts.

19) In §5.2.28, which I discuss in Ueno (forthcoming), Vasubandhu clearly states his view that the Dharma was disappearing, namely, that Buddhism had declined amongst both renunciates and laypeople and that it was in danger of dying out.

Abbreviations

AKBh	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣya</i> (Vasubandhu): <i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu</i> . Ed. P. Pradhan. Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967.
AKTA	<i>Abhidharmakośaṭīkā-tattvārthā</i> (Sthiramati): D 4421, P 5875.
D	Derge Block Print Edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka.
GAS	<i>Gāthārthasaṃgraha</i> (Unknown): D 4103, P 5604.
Mvy(IF)	<i>Mahāvīyutpatti. A New Critical Edition of the Mahāvīyutpatti</i> . Eds. Ishihama Yumiko and Fukuda Yōichi. Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1989.
P	Peking Block Print Edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka.
VyY	<i>Vyākhyāyukti</i> (Vasubandhu): D 4061, P 5562.
VyYṬ	<i>Vyākhyāyuktiṭīkā</i> (Guṇamati): D 4069, P 5570.

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